

Royal Australian Air Force  
Commemoration of 450 Squadron  
70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Departure  
Officer's Mess  
RAAF Base Williamtown

It's a pleasure to be here today on behalf of the Minister for Defence, the Hon Stephen Smith MP, to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the departure of 450 Squadron, the 'Desert Harassers'.

I'd like to acknowledge all the former members of 450 Squadron that are with us today.

This airbase has long made an enormous contribution to the community of the Hunter region, to the security of our nation and to peace throughout the world.

The long and distinguished record of 450 Squadron is a case in point.

It is now 70 years to the day since the members of 450 Squadron left this very base to a destination and fate that was unknown to them.

As they departed Sydney Harbour on the 'Queen Elizabeth', part of the largest convey to depart Australia during the Second World War, the members of the Squadron would have had little idea they would soon play an important role in vital Allied operations against Axis forces in the Middle East.

On arrival in the Middle East, combined with pilots and Hawker Hurricanes from the British Royal Air Force, they first saw action in June 1941 against Vichy French forces in Syria.

In December 1941, however, they were equipped with the distinctive P40 Kittyhawk aircraft for which the squadron is now famous.

It was in these aircraft that they served with distinction above the desert sands of northern Africa in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia.

And it was here they played a significant role in the historic defeat of Rommel's Axis forces at the Battle of El Alamein and further battles across Libya and Tunisia.

Indeed, we see played out this very day the importance of air power in securing any successful military campaign in the long, sprawling deserts of North Africa.

The squadron's exploits were so effective, they soon earned the ire of famous German propagandist 'Lord Haw Haw', who criticised their "harassing tactics."

In true Australian style, the Squadron took their notoriety as a badge of pride and were henceforth known as the 'Desert Harassers.'

It was also here in North Africa that 450 Squadron fought alongside No 3 Squadron.

And the strong bonds that were formed between these two squadrons continue to this very day.

Although best known for its role in North Africa, the Squadron also went on to serve in major Allied operations in Sicily, Italy and elsewhere over Europe.

War is an awful thing.

And to help avoid it, its important we not glorify it.

But there are times when a democratic nation has no choice but to take up arms and World War II was unquestionably one of those occasions.

When we do decide to send young men and women to risk their lives in war, we must provide them our unwavering support.

We must also ensure that the memory of their sacrifice and contribution is preserved.

And it should humble us all to recall that those young men who left this base those 70 years ago would go to make such an important contribution to both Australia's security and global freedom.

I also wish to acknowledge the important role of the 450 Squadron RAAF Association in keeping the memory of their contribution alive.

Finally, I would also like to pay tribute to the men and women of the RAAF base Williamtown, who continue to embody the best of the tradition started by 450 Squadron.

The personnel here also continue to make a major contribution to Australia's role in important military operations abroad.

So today, we pay our deepest tribute to 450 Squadron, to the personnel of RAAF Base Williamtown and to all members of the Royal Australian Airforce, both past and present.